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Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Citation for published version:

Cairns, D, Coombs, N, Devine, T, Hearn, J, Jarvie, G, MacLeod, G, Paterson, L, Rosie, M, Thin, N & Mathieson, P 2020, *Letter concerning the David Hume Tower*..

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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This file contains correspondence about the decision by the University of Edinburgh to re-name the David Hume Tower. The first item is a letter sent to the university principal, Peter Mathieson, by nine academics at the university. There follows the email exchanges which subsequently took place between these signatories (by means of one of them, Dr Michael Rosie) and Professor Mathieson, and also between them and vice-principal James Smith. The final block of emails confirms that the principal is happy for this correspondence to be placed in the public domain.

15 September 2020

Dear Professor Mathieson

We write to express our strong objection to the recent decision to 'temporarily' rename the David Hume Tower as '40 George Square', thereby sending out a message to the wider public that the University wishes to distance itself from the history and legacy of David Hume, an Edinburgh University student, Edinburgh resident, and leading figure in the Scottish Enlightenment and the history of ideas. Our concerns are about matters of procedure, principle, and reputation.

Regarding procedure, there was a plan in place, led by Prof James Smith, to undertake a University-wide review of issues of building naming, and foster dialogue about it. This decision has dismissively circumvented that process, and it is not clear who within the University has actually taken the decision. This not only undermines confidence in the plan to 'foster dialogue', it also suggests that the University has already concluded principles upon which buildings are to be 'de-named'. Given other buildings are named after individuals whose attitudes and writings towards race are more programmatic, and more recent, than David Hume's, then the focus on this particular building appears tokenistic rather than principled. The decision on the David Hume Tower ignores the importance of dialogue and seriously compromises the Smith Review—which is of vital importance to how the University considers such a complex issue—before it has even begun. This is an area which requires sensitivity, tact, procedural transparency and patience. The peremptory nature of the decision suggests that the leadership of this University do not recognise or understand this.

Regarding principles, a university is a place of intellectual work, and where traditions of intellectual work are remembered and productively engaged with. This fact shapes such things as the naming of buildings. That Hume should be commemorated through the naming of a building after him is entirely appropriate given his great and locally relevant achievements. No one is above criticism, and critical engagement with his ideas is entirely appropriate, but we should engage with figures like this in the round, not by focussing narrowly on the flaws. Hume's views on race, which as many have said were common in his day, were nonetheless marginal to his body of ideas. No one would object to a public statement, such as signage on the building in question, recognising and criticising Hume's racist views. Such signage would provide an educational opportunity, encouraging critical debate about Hume and his times. But the point is, those views are not the reason the building is named after him. It is in recognition of his enduring influence in philosophy, history, and political economy. His work is widely respected and admired, even while criticised. To address this issue solely on the basis of the matter of one racist footnote is simplistic, and not appropriate for a serious university.

Regarding reputation, there are two aspects to consider. One is the public reputation of the University. As has already been suggested, this decision sends out a message to a global public that the University lacks an ability to deal with these issues with any nuance, and falsely suggests that it has somehow been in error in celebrating him in the past, an error that is now being 'corrected'. The public debate since the decision was put on the

University website tends to confirm this damage to the university's reputation. But there is also the matter of what this move says about the reputations of colleagues who work on Hume, and have a deep intellectual commitment to his work. It suggests the University also regards these colleagues' work as dubious or disreputable. Any university sensitive to the members of its community, would consider this impact and consult with those who might be affected by such a decision. History contains many offensive things that cannot now be undone. What matters is how those living in the present conduct themselves towards one another.

Signed

Prof Douglas Cairns
Dr Nathan Coombs
Prof Sir Thomas M. Devine
Prof Jonathan Hearn
Prof Grant Jarvie
Dr Gale Macleod
Prof Lindsay Paterson
Dr Michael Rosie
Dr Neil Thin

Correspondence with the principal and with vice-principal James Smith about the substance of the above letter.

Sent: 18 September 2020 09:49

To: SMITH James <james.smith@ed.ac.uk>; Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: RE: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Hi James

Many thanks: I will pass this on.

As you know I am always happy to discuss such issues – though these exchanges have left me less, rather than more, reassured.

All very best wishes

Michael

From: SMITH James <james.smith@ed.ac.uk>

Sent: 18 September 2020 08:27

To: Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>

Cc: ROSIE Michael <M.J.Rosie@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Dear Michael and Colleagues,

I am very happy to engage with the co-signatories of the letter and welcome any involvement in the process - as you know I have already reached out to Jonathan Hearn given his expertise on Hume.

Happy to arrange an e-meeting or an appropriately socially distanced physical meeting to outline the process and receive your thoughts on this - in relation to the DHT, but more importantly more broadly.

Best wishes,
James

Professor James Smith
Vice Principal - International
Professor of African & Development Studies
University of Edinburgh

Tel: +44 (0)131 650 4321 [direct]
Tel: +44 (0)131 650 4315 [PA]

Twitter: @SobukweScozia
Research: @INZI_Edinburgh

On 18 Sep 2020, at 00:08, Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk> wrote:

Michael (et al)

Thank you for your further message. Thank you also for welcoming the efforts we are making to address historical and contemporary racism. I have copied James Smith on this reply because he is coordinating much of this effort and I am sure that if you and/or any of your co-signatories wish to contribute he would welcome your involvement. I tried to explain the “de-coupling” in my previous reply and won’t repeat it here. Just for the record, the student mentioned in my previous message is not “notional”: he is real, quoted by James in some of his contributions to our decision-making process. If I had the opportunity to talk to him, I would try to convince him that his voice has been heard and is being treated with respect, and that the current Principal of his University is doing his best to balance individual concerns with the broader context. Of course I accept that the recent media coverage has been negative: I regret the fact that much of it, and certainly most of the social media comment, has missed two crucial points, namely that no-one in the leadership of the University believes that this is the only step that should be taken (or indeed that this step does anything in itself to address the crucial issue of contemporary racism) and secondly that of course the University is not “cancelling” or detaching itself from the study of Hume. All of my communications on the subject, including my reply to your first message, have been explicit that neither of these things is true.

I was surprised that you didn’t comment on the piece written by Dr Jennifer Marusic that I thought I had sent you, but realise now that the attachment might not have forwarded: my apologies if that is the case. I thought it was powerful and thought-provoking, and especially so because it is based on subject expertise way beyond my own. So, in answer to your last question, my senior colleagues and I propose to ask such experts to lead the debate on Hume, and other

experts to lead other aspects of the debate, so that the University of Edinburgh can deploy its considerable assets to reach evidence-based conclusions. In this way, the reputation of the University, about which you and I care so deeply, can be enhanced.

With best regards,

Peter

From: ROSIE Michael <M.J.Rosie@ed.ac.uk>

Sent: 17 September 2020 11:17

To: Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: RE: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Dear Peter

Many thanks for your swift reply on a complex topic. I write this in collaboration with all the original signatories to the letter.

We agree that the ambitions of a modern University on addressing racism must go much wider and deeper than a single building, and we warmly welcome the investment of time and resources into challenging historical and contemporary racism and, indeed, expanded commitment to researching David Hume and his legacies.

We are deeply concerned about the decision – lacking wider consultation or clear public explanation – to ‘de-couple’ the DHT from that broader approach. Rather than setting issues around Hume’s writings to one side, this decision put the building’s name to the forefront, opened the University to ridicule, and (worst of all) obscured the deeper work against racism. That process – of genuine engagement and reflection, of listening to diverse views, of considering what is known and what we yet need to know, and the commitment of adequate resources towards this – would be our response to your notional student: ‘we *hear* you, let us *investigate* the evidence together and *debate* it.’

This decision has backfired and at very considerable and ongoing cost to the University’s global reputation. This ‘temporary’ decision will shape and impact on the wider work to come and undermine confidence in it. After all, what kind of research project declares one of its own findings in advance? If the decision is truly temporary, then there must be a possibility of reverting to the original name. In that event, what would *you* say to your notional student?

Much work is required to address the damage caused by this extremely controversial and divisive renaming. It has given no benefit to the University’s crucial work on racism, which must now be rescued from the resultant unnecessary distractions. We, as academics and as individuals, remain fully committed to our institution addressing its past. We hope that you will rapidly return the University’s focus to addressing the real and urgent issues of contemporary racism and the other inequalities that blight our society, and our institution.

Do you accept that whatever reasons underlay the decisions made, the result has been to cause substantial external damage to the University’s reputation? What do you and your senior colleagues intend to do to repair it?

With all best wishes

Michael (et al)

Michael Rosie
Editor, Scottish Affairs
Senior Lecturer in Sociology
Programme Co-Director, Nationalism Studies
School of Social and Political Science
University of Edinburgh
22 George Square
Edinburgh UK EH8 9LF

Full details: https://www.sociology.ed.ac.uk/staff_profiles/rosie_michael

From: [Peter MATHIESON](#)

Sent: 15 September 2020 22:03

To: [ROSIE Michael](#)

Subject: RE: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Michael (and colleagues: I assume you will relay my response to your co-signatories)

Thank you for your letter. I will attempt to address your points in order. Your first paragraph expresses your objection to the decision: I accept and understand that, and note that there is a wide range of opinion across the University community on this issue.

Regarding procedure, you are correct that James Smith has been leading a broader piece of work, but not that this is about “issues of building naming”: it is much broader and includes consideration of decolonialisation of our curricula and various other aspects of addressing concerns about contemporary racism. The leadership of the work has been taken over by Sarah Cunningham-Burley as chair of the University’s Equality & Diversity Committee and Rowena Arshad as chair of its Race Equality and Anti-Racist Sub-committee. I haven’t previously seen the plan described as “the Smith Review”, but James has been a major contributor to discussions on the subject including presenting a paper outlining the options at the meeting of the University Executive, the main decision-making body of the University, at its meeting on 21st July. My initial instinct, which I voiced on numerous occasions, was not to separate this issue from the wider set of issues, and I expressed a concern (which I still hold) that re-naming or de-naming one building does nothing to address the real and urgent issues of contemporary racism. However, numerous senior colleagues felt that as a signal of intent and a demonstration that we were taking seriously some of the powerful comments received (of which more below), there was a case for taking

action ahead of the conclusions of the wider pieces of work. No formal decision was taken at that meeting of the Executive, but strong preferences were expressed for the options which included some change in the name of the building. The next set of decision points came during the meetings of the Adaptation & Renewal Board, which has been the locus of the University's rapid decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic. This Board has met weekly during recent months and I can't remember (but can check if you so wish) exactly which meeting or meetings considered the David Hume Tower, but I can clearly remember the reason it became the business of this Board. This was because of a decision about study space: you will be aware that study space is seriously constrained because of the social distancing requirements imposed upon us by government guidelines on safety considerations in response to the pandemic. David Hume Tower was (is) considered suitable as a large study space to augment the Main Library, whose capacity is radically reduced by social distancing. A decision was made, which I agreed with and still do, that it would be provocative to ask even more students to use the building when we knew that sensitivities had been expressed. Attention was already focused on the building by the petition; the building was occupied by student protesters during the recent industrial action and there was a concern that it could again become the focus of protest, precluding its use as a study space and undermining our attempt to provide the best possible study space for our students in challenging circumstances. A decision was taken to de-couple the naming of this building from the broader (and slower: this was urgent because of the need to plan study space for the upcoming semester) set of assessments. You and your colleagues might disagree with this decision, but it was taken in good faith. I would ask you all to consider: what would you say to the black student who said that he felt deeply uncomfortable being in a building named after someone who considered him a lesser being than other humans? I don't know how many of your signatories are people of colour, but as a white person myself I find it difficult to dismiss or trivialise the lived experience of one of our black students, or to categorise the discomfort as "woke" or "snowflake" as some have done. The statement from Sarah Cunningham-Burley on the decision <https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/students/2020/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-an-update>) explained the timing.

On principles, I agree that universities should be places of debate. In my responses to e-mails on the subject, I have drawn attention to the blog published by one of your co-signatories, Jonathan Hearn, which articulates the issue better than I can <https://uneasyessays.com/2020/09/13/remembering-hume/>

Regarding reputation, in my responses I have emphasised that we continue to be committed to teaching, researching and understanding Hume in all his facets and that the recent appointment by our Philosophy department of three Hume experts exemplifies this. Far from cutting our links with Hume, we are actively expanding our study of his work. Colleagues in Philosophy have suggested some very constructive ways of taking the debate forward. I have just this evening been sent a message written by one of those Hume scholars: it is powerful and I will ask whether it can be shared with you. In my opinion, the reputation of the University of Edinburgh can be enhanced if its academics demonstrate a willingness to address the most difficult aspects of our past.

With best regards, Peter

From: ROSIE Michael <M.J.Rosie@ed.ac.uk>

Sent: 15 September 2020 18:12

To: Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Dear Professor Mathieson

Please see the attached open letter concerning the 'de-naming' of the David Hume Tower from a number of academic colleagues in the Schools of Social and Political Science and History, Classics and Archaeology.

We are, collectively, deeply concerned about serious issues this decision raises about University procedures, intellectual principles, and damage to the global reputation of our University. The media coverage of the decision has highlighted widespread disquiet on the part of academics, commentators, and even Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Justice. We would be very interested to hear your response.

With all best wishes

Michael (on behalf of colleagues)

—

Michael Rosie
Editor, Scottish Affairs
Senior Lecturer in Sociology
Programme Co-Director, Nationalism Studies
School of Social and Political Science
University of Edinburgh
22 George Square
Edinburgh UK EH8 9LF

Full details: https://www.sociology.ed.ac.uk/staff_profiles/rosie_michael

The attachment here was the open letter at the beginning of this document.
<Hume statement.docx>

Sent: 21 September 2020 22:42

To: Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>; SMITH James <james.smith@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: RE: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Yes, that's only fair and transparent.

All best

Michael

From: Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>

Sent: 21 September 2020 22:26

To: ROSIE Michael <M.J.Rosie@ed.ac.uk>; SMITH James <james.smith@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Michael

Agreed. Let's stipulate, messages in their entirety, not selected excerpts.

Thanks,

Peter

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From: ROSIE Michael <M.J.Rosie@ed.ac.uk>

Sent: Monday, September 21, 2020 10:24:06 PM

To: Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>; SMITH James <james.smith@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: RE: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Dear Peter

Apologies for delayed response – quite a day.

Very happy for you to share this, on the understanding that we too can share the correspondence with interested parties.

All very best

Michael

From: Peter MATHIESON <principal@ed.ac.uk>

Sent: 21 September 2020 11:34

To: ROSIE Michael <M.J.Rosie@ed.ac.uk>; SMITH James <james.smith@ed.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Letter concerning the David Hume Tower

Michael

Would you or your co-signatories have any objection to me sharing our correspondence with interested parties? At present it is only one Emeritus Professor that has asked, but there might be others in future. Since your open letter was by definition “open”, I realise that it is already in the public domain, so I am referring here to the associated e-mails.

With best wishes,

Peter